

THE MAJORITY RESPONSE RALLY IN TRENTON, MAY 27, 1968

A Recapitulation and Evaluation

by Ernest Erber, Rally Coordinator

Shortly after the conclusion of the Majority Response Rally held on May 27, 1968, in Trenton, I determined to make a final report in the form of a recapitulation of the events that transpired and the results of the "Majority" campaign. This was postponed in the interests of including a final accounting of the various urban aid measures then pending in the Legislature or awaiting either the Governor's signature or veto. As with many good resolves, this one was lost in the shuffle of other, more pressing, obligations.

The failure to prepare such a report, I now discover to my chagrin, has had grievous results. The minutes of a new coalition of civic groups, which have just reached me, contain a reference to the Majority Response Rally as an example of an ineffective effort to influence the Legislature. This judgment, reflecting either misinformation or misinterpretation, spurs me to take up the long-postponed task, this time as both information report and analysis.

I. Recapitulation*

1. The Governor's Select Commission on Civil Disorder issues its report on February 11, 1968, setting forth a series of far-reaching recommendations for State measures to aid its core cities, the implementation of which required relatively sizable outlays.

2. The Governor called New Jersey's mayors to Trenton on April 16, 1968, a few days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, and addressed to them a moving appeal that "business as usual" was not enough to meet the urban crisis and promised to go before the Legislature with a request for money, detailed by line items. He asked for their support by proposing "a similar insistence at the local level on an end to business as usual..." There is little evidence that his request was heeded locally.

3. The Governor addressed the Legislature on April 25, 1968, in a special message which he entitled "A Moral Recommitment for New Jersey," couched in dramatic language that rang with the urgency of an alarm bell and set forth a "grocery list" of items totaling \$126 million. With the constituencies of the legislative majority in mind, the Governor noted that "No resident of the most affluent

* The preparation of this summary is greatly facilitated by Call For Action: The Efforts of the Majority Response Rally, a documentary report by Bruce W. Frankel, Program Aide at Rutgers' Urban Studies Center, published by the Center in the summer of 1968. It contains the transcripts of the speeches at the Rally, press reports, etc. A supplement gives Mr. Frankel's analysis of the Legislature's allocations for urban aid under various programs.

suburb can look any longer with unconcern on either the decay or the violence of our cities." It soon became apparent that these constituencies did not get the message and that their representatives were not prepared to respond with urban aid on the scale requested by the Governor.

4. The Trenton Human Relations Council decided that it was necessary to impress upon the Legislature the existence of a body of opinion in white, suburban New Jersey that supported the Select Commission's recommendations for urban aid. They first thought of organizing it as the voice of the "white majority," as urged by Negro leaders. Fear that it would accentuate racial division led to the decision to call it the "Majority Response." It was decided to campaign by every means possible for implementation of the Select Commission's recommendations, with a rally in Trenton on May 27, a legislative day, as the focal point.

5. The Majority Response Rally was supported by a most distinguished list of sponsors, headed by former Governors Robert B. Meyner and Alfred E. Driscoll as Co-Chairmen and containing leaders from many spheres of activity or commitment. The sponsors included an impressive representation from individuals and institutions not generally identified with social issue causes in New Jersey. Among the latter were a surprising number of endorsements from persons who are generally conservative and nominally Republican, a number of whom contributed generously to defray the Rally's costs.

6. The activist core of the Majority Response Rally consisted of the Trenton Human Relations Council, the New Jersey League of Women Voters, and a number of devoted individuals drawn from various connections. I served as Coordinator, using the facilities and connections of my office (Regional Plan Association, Newark) though the essential organization tasks of a communications center were performed by a handful of tireless workers at the Human Relations Council office in Trenton, which served as the Rally's headquarters.

7. The Rally's public information campaign reached an audience of impressive size. Full or half page ads were purchased in some six daily newspapers and several weeklies. Releases were widely used by newspapers, radio and television. Over 25,000 leaflets announcing the Rally, its objectives and the names of the sponsors were distributed through the mail and by hand at churches, on campuses, etc. Each member of the Legislature was invited to the Rally by letter and telegram. (The effectiveness of the publicity was attested to by Senator McDermott, who stated that he had heard it discussed in his church for two weeks.)

8. The Rally was attended by some 2,000 persons according to most estimates, as determined by Mr. Frankel in his study. Four Senators and 26 Assemblymen signed the Legislators' attendance list on the Rally platform with both parties represented about equally. Senator Fairleigh S. Dickinson expressed his regret by wire because of illness. The Rally was televised, and taped excerpts of remarks were included in many of the newscasts on the event. It was given prominent space in New Jersey dailies and in the metropolitan papers

published in New York and Philadelphia. The front page story in The New York Times, illustrated with a picture of former Governor Driscoll as Rally Chairman, had this lead paragraph: "A major Republican revolt in the Legislature and a 'rich people's march' on the state capital combined here today to project new hope for Governor Richard J. Hughes' urban aid and capital construction programs." The Rally was mentioned in a number of editorials in support of urban aid.

9. Some 35 sponsors lunched together at the Hotel Hildebrecht following the Rally on a note of enthusiasm generated by the day's events. Both the conduct of the Rally and the attendance were commented on with great satisfaction.* Those present were an important segment of New Jersey's leadership in education, publishing, the professions, religion, labor, management, fair housing, urban coalitions, voter education and community civic life. A prominent place in their discussion was occupied by suggestions for stimulating the sending of letters and wires to the Legislature, the same note on which I had closed the Rally. (How many letters and wires resulted is not known.)

* Typical of the expressions of pride by the Rally's sponsors is this report to the members of the League of Women Voters by Ann Klein, President, in the September issue of their state newsletter, The New Jersey Voter: "On the 27th of May in Trenton I stood on a platform looking out on a sea of people. There you were, League members, demonstrating with your presence, your signs, your enthusiasm that you deeply care about the plight of people in our cities, and that you want legislative remedies to shameful problems. I was so proud to speak for you that day, and so grateful for all you had done to insure a successful rally."

10. Governor Hughes had asked the Legislature for \$126.14 million for urban aid on April 25. The Republican Majority, interpreting their election as a mandate from the electorate to stress economy, were slow to respond to the Governor's request. Almost a month later, on May 22, they announced a Republican urban aid program of \$54.8 million. Only two days later the Republicans revised this figure upward to \$58.875 million (see Foundation for the Future, a statement issued by Republican Legislative Majority, May 25, 1968). On the day of the Rally, the Republicans increased this figure to \$70 million, largely as a result of pressure from the Bergen and Essex delegations. The impact of the Rally's publicity had been especially strong in these two counties.

The Republican Majority had countered the Governor's proposal with a provision that 10 per cent of sales tax revenues be distributed to the municipalities on a strict per capita basis. Mr. Frankel, after an involved computation of the number of inhabitants in municipalities that qualify as in need of urban aid (eligibility under Title I of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act) and a survey of how they would use the money, concluded that \$13.25 million returned to the municipalities under this law could be designated as urban aid within the Governor's use of the term in his special message. The addition of this amount raised the Legislative allocation for urban aid to \$83,127,137.50.

The Governor's request included an item of \$25 million for housing construction. The Legislature failed to appropriate any money for this purpose in the 1968-69 budget, but countered

with a \$12.5 million housing bond issue to be submitted to the voters. This bond issue was approved in the November elections and the \$12.5 can now be added to the urban aid made available by the Legislature, bringing the total to \$95,627,137.50.

The Legislature also distributed some \$34 million in additional local school aid on the basis of \$25 per pupil. Though this was not weighed in favor of poverty-impacted school districts (e.g., some \$1.9 million for Newark). It is safe to say that at least \$5 million went to poverty-impacted school districts under the Legislature's \$25-per-pupil formula. This would bring the Legislature's urban aid total to some \$100 million as compared with their initial announcement of \$54.8 million, or an increase of some \$45.2 million over the Republican's original proposals.

11. Concurrent with the Legislative dispute over the amount of urban aid to be appropriated in the annual budget, the Governor and the Republican Majority clashed over the size of the Capital Program Bond Issues to be submitted to the voters. Urban aid and capital needs became closely identified: the Governor again urging the larger amount of bond issues, \$1,746.8 million, and the Republican Majority countering on May 24th with a lesser sum, \$890 million. On the day of the Rally, the Republicans began negotiating with the Governor for a compromise figure and upped the amount by another \$100 million to \$990 million. This amount was agreed upon by both sides for submittal to the voters, who approved in November.

The transcript of the remarks of the Republican Legislative spokesmen at the Rally (McDermott, Forsythe, Moraites) indicates that they related the two issues and assumed that those supporting a larger urban aid appropriation also supported the larger bond issue proposal. (Assemblyman Moraites seemed to be under the impression that the Rally was on behalf of the bond issues). The Rally, therefore, also contributed to the addition of \$100 million for capital needs.

II. Evaluation

The statement that the Majority Response Rally was ineffective is based on either an ignorance of the above facts or on an interpretation of the event that is confined by the assumption that the purpose of a demonstration is to permit the Legislators to make a (warm) body count and decide on this basis how to vote. The latter interpretation takes at face value the arguments advanced by the Republican Legislative leaders. This contention was advanced by Senator McDermott in his address at the Rally:

"Now I did say something yesterday to the press and they carried it this morning. I said the fact that this rally here would be very determinant of what the Legislature would do with regard to a new program. Well, I called several people this morning because I know how you people worked to make this rally a success. In my own church for two weeks now they have talked about it, and they have put out bulletins and I understand they've done that in every municipality in this State, and there was tremendous publicity about this -- quarter page ads. You had everything to bring people down here and I

must say I appreciate the fact that you people came here, but you haven't come down with the force that you should had had if the public were with you in this area and I regret to say that. I regret to say that, but it's true. Because Senator Forsythe pointed out, and this is what you have to do, you have to go back home and convince the others of this. They're lethargic or they may have other reasons, but one thing is certain, they should have been here today like you."

(Murmur of disapproval)

Senator McDermott's specious argument was answered most effectively by successive speakers who followed him, especially by Rabbi Samuel Cohen:

..."It is time to remind our Legislators, that we are not interested in political football, (Applause), that we did not send, that we do not send to Trenton, athletes (Applause); that we send hopefully, men of moral responsibility (Applause) who will recognize what the problems are, the human problems, and move to correct them and to act on them.

"I believe that the several thousand people who are here represent not only themselves, not only you, but that there are hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people who stand behind you (Applause). It is not an easy thing for a woman to leave her home and her family and her children on a Monday morning (Applause). And those of you who have come, have made tremendous sacrifices to be here. It is not easy for a man to leave his job and not to go to the office on a Monday morning. But, so many of you have come and you speak not only for yourselves, but perhaps for millions who feel like you. And we ought to let our leaders know that (Applause)."

The truth of Rabbi Cohen's contention that each Rally participant was representative of others at home is borne out by the leadership roles of those who addressed the Rally:

Alfred E. Driscoll, former Republican Governor

Mrs. Robert Klein, President, New Jersey League of Women Voters

The Honorable Lawrence Kramer, Republican Mayor of Paterson

Ben Z. Leuchter, Publisher of the Vineland Times Journal

John Q. Adams, President, Union Terminal Cold Storage, Inc., and prominent Catholic layman speaking on behalf of New Jersey's Bishops

Arnold K. Weber, Vice President, Radio Corporation of America

Joel R. Jacobson, President, New Jersey Industrial Union Council, AFL-CIO

Thomas W. Button, President, New Jersey Jaycees

Oliver Lofton, attorney and civil rights leader

Walter H. Jones, former Senator and one time Republican leader from Bergen County

Mrs. Millicent Fenwick, Republican State Committeewoman, Bernardsville

Rabbi Samuel Cohen, Temple Beth Shalom, Livingston

John J. Gibbons, President, New Jersey Bar Association

Mason W. Gross, President, Rutgers-The State University

Ernest Erber, Area Director, New Jersey Committee, Regional Plan Association

Legislators, as politicians well versed in calculating political strength, knew that the president of a state organization does not necessarily speak for a majority of its members on a controversial issue. However, by the same measure of their ability to judge strength, the Legislators knew that this representative gathering of leaders spoke for a sizable segment of the voters.

How, for example, could a Legislator remain unimpressed by the statement read to the Rally by Mr. Adams on behalf of the Catholic Bishops?

"Governor Driscoll:

Deeply conscious of our responsibility to the common good of our fellow citizens in New Jersey and profoundly aware of the disastrous consequences of a renewal of civil disorders in our State, we endorse in principle the Majority Response Rally to be held in Trenton on May 27th.

We would urge our people, as far as possible, to associate themselves with this endeavor and thus to demonstrate their concern for the development in the State of such proper educational, housing, welfare and anti-poverty programs as will attack the causes that contribute to such disorders while safeguarding the personal dignity of our fellow citizens.

signed,

(Most Rev.) Bishop George Ahr, Trenton
 (Most Rev.) Archbishop Thomas Boland, Newark
 (Most Rev.) Bishop Lawrence, Casey, Paterson
 (Most Rev.) Bishop George Guilfoyle, Camden
 (Most Rev.) Bishop Stephen Kocisko,
 The Administrator of the Byzantine
 Eparchy, Passaic

Those who contend that the Rally was ineffective have yet to answer this question: Why did the economy-minded Republican majority, elected ostensibly in a voter's backlash at the sales tax, increase their urban aid commitment from some \$54 million to some \$100 million in the course of about five weeks? And increase their capital needs bond total by \$100 million?

They obviously did not simply do it because 2,000 persons came to a rally in Trenton. But just as obviously, the Majority Response Rally contributed to a public opinion climate in New Jersey during May and early June that caused the Legislative Majority to retreat repeatedly from each successive "economy line" announced after their various caucus meetings.

How effective was the Majority Response campaign? How much in the changed climate of public opinion and Legislative action can be traced to its existence and its activities?

If one were to assume that the Majority Response Rally can take credit for only 50 per cent of the increased urban aid, or 25 per cent, it would be impressive in dollars and cents. Even if only 10 per cent were credited to the campaign, it would represent some \$4.5 million in urban aid and some \$10 million in capital needs bond issues. Is that being ineffective?

How much of the change in the public opinion climate would have taken place had this unique coalition never been formed? Through what other channels would these pressures upon the Legislature have asserted themselves? True; the League of Women Voters would have been just as active. True, other groups and individuals would have written their Legislators. But would this have appeared on the front pages of newspapers, on TV screens and in newscasts? Would it have prompted editors to write editorials? Would it have caused their letters to appear in full page ads and be announced from the pulpit? Hardly.

The effort at a Majority Response campaign without a Rally would not have been as effective. A campaign benefits immensely from a focal point -- a dramatic event -- a definite deadline -- a confrontation. Even if the Rally itself had proven a failure, which it did not, its by-products in heightening public awareness

of the issues would have been effective. Without the Rally, it would have been far more difficult to arouse interest and support from those who became sponsors. Would Meyner and Driscoll have accepted to serve as co-chairmen of a state-wide letter-writing project?

But was not 2,000 a small attendance that demonstrated weakness, as Senator McDermott alleged, rather than strength? The answer to this must begin by a frank recognition that urban aid has only firm support from a minority in New Jersey. There are no multitudes of taxpayers, especially outside of the central cities, clamoring for increased appropriations for urban aid. Not much enthusiasm could be expected for urban aid from suburban homeowners groaning under local tax burdens and smarting from the imposition of a sales tax that gives no currently visible local relief. Active support could be expected only from those suburbanites who are sophisticated enough to realize that, in the end, the social disorganization and fiscal bankruptcy of the central cities will pull down with them the rest of the state. The numbers who realize this are relatively small, even if growing.

If urban aid has but weak support within the State, especially from the suburban areas where the Republican Legislators' constituencies are largely located, why choose to bring people to a rally in Trenton whose sheer numbers would not impress Legislators? Why not have followed a tactic calculated to create the image of a vast public demand for urban aid? The answers to these questions reveal that securing Legislative action is more complex than body-counting and, further, that the relationship of forces on

the urban aid question was a unique one which called for a unique response.

To begin with, the Republican Legislative leadership wished that the Governor was wrong on urban aid, but knew that he was substantially right. None of them contested the findings of the Select Commission. A number of them stated publicly on April 25, that they considered the Governor's special message to be moving and impressive. They realized that the Legislature could ignore the urban situation only at its peril -- and that of the State as a whole. They knew that something extraordinary had to be done. But they also knew that they had been elected by a majority that was protesting high taxes, and that their constituents, not yet realizing that urban aid was for their own long-range benefit, would feel betrayed by Republican support for urban dwellers. The Legislative Majority, therefore, was inclined to agree with the Governor on urban aid in principle (partisan reasons making it impossible to accept his specific program), though they feared to vote for urban aid in the face of constituents who appeared as a solid phalanx of uncomprehending, tax-conscious censors.

This situation suggested the rallying of those forces in the state that represented potential pressures upon the Legislative Majority in two respects:

1. The intellectual pressure of a peer group that could remind the Legislative leadership of their responsibility to the greater public interest as dictated by their knowledge of the urban situation and of what should be done to alleviate it.

2. The pressure of sophisticated, highly articulate groups and individuals from within their home constituencies that could remind them that subservience to an unenlightened, tax-conscious majority could prove dangerous since well-informed, activist minorities often gather strength through public education.

That the Rally's sponsors were a peer group, a representative selection of the State's responsible leaders, sitting in judgment of Legislators' responsibility to the common good was apparent from a reading of their names. It was not a "gimme" group; it had no self-interest in urban aid. It asked for nothing -- except to be taxed! Truly, a unique pressure group! It asked only that the Legislature measure up to an historic crisis and prove itself capable of acting responsibly on behalf of the public welfare, to rise in stature, to try to do what their peers, acting selflessly, expected of them.

Republican Legislators looking down from the speakers' platform saw familiar types, even if they failed to spot familiar faces. These were, in the words of Mr. Frankel, "...mostly middle and upper class white suburban New Jersey women. Many of these supporters carried signs which proclaimed: 'Morristown Teachers Support Urban Aid,' 'Princeton is Willing to Pay,' 'Erase Racism' and 'Urban Blight is a Suburban Fight'."

Legislators are sufficiently astute in these matters to know that the audience represented far-seeing, idealistic minorities within their home communities. But they are also sufficiently astute to recognize in these minorities the civic activists, capable organizers, and effective molders of community opinion who could be their potential defenders and able allies

if they should choose to defy the tax-conscious, short-sighted majority and vote for the greater public good in the form of urban aid. The fact that there are only 2,000 of them rather than 10,000 is of less importance to a knowledgeable Legislator. He understands that by November 1969, minorities can become majorities. (An indication of possible trends: a decisive majority of voters approved \$12.5 million for urban housing in the November 1968 bond referendum). He also realizes that bringing citizens to Trenton from all over the state on a Monday morning is a herculean undertaking. And how often have as many as 2,000 come to Trenton, even in their own naked self-interest? Or even 200? In this respect, it was unlike any previous demonstration.

"The rally" writes Frankel, "was the first known demonstration in the United States by whites demanding increased aid to urban slums. For the organizers of this unique rally it was the culmination of weeks of effort; however, for all it was the beginning of a campaign to ensure that the problem of our center cities are alleviated and that future civil disorders shall not recur."

A Personal Note

In my lifetime I have participated in or observed countless rallies, demonstrations, mass meetings and picket lines, beginning as a youth in the bitter depression winter of 1931-32 when I journeyed to Springfield from my native Chicago with the unemployed seeking aid from a bewildered Legislature acting on behalf of a near-bankrupt state. My evaluation of the Majority Response Rally, therefore, is based on a considerable expertise. The Rally, though numerically one of the smallest was in my judgment, one of the most effective I have ever participated in.

The strategy of mobilizing the elites of white, affluent suburban America on behalf of urban programs is yet to be fully understood. Bayard Rustin and Sol Alinsky, both demonstrated masters in the mobilization of support for public policy goals, have each recently shown an awareness of the potentialities of this strategy. This might prove to be the real significance of the Majority Response Rally in the long run. There is nothing unique about an open-air demonstration of thousands of people. It is only one means toward an end. But the coalition gathered in the name of the Majority Response Rally was unique. Its sponsors should consider the great potential for the public good which it represents. Most of the recommendations of the Select Commission on Civil Disorders remain unrealized. There is much to be done.